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## Using Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus to Explore Narratives of Transition

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**ABSTRACT** Written as part of a doctoral thesis exploring young people's educational decision making, this article focuses on the stories of three of those students. The study on which the article draws is located in two institutions: an independent school and a sixth-form college. It follows 12 middle-class young people through their two years of A level study prior to university. The thesis argues for educational decision making as a classed practice, using Bourdieu's trilogy of habitus, capital and field to develop a more nuanced understanding than that offered by occupationally defined social class. This article focuses on the narratives of three of those students. Drawing on their narratives of transition, the article aims to explore how far the concept of habitus can be used in empirical research. It is concluded that whilst there are limitations to what habitus offers as a research tool, it is a concept worth grappling with. If its promise is partially fulfilled, at the very least it accentuates the inadequacy of defining individuals through the labels of social class. Above all, habitus embraces continuity and change, offering a more fluid and dynamic understanding of classed identities.

### Introduction

The concept of habitus forms a key part of Bourdieu's conceptual tool kit and is arguably his most popular and widely-referenced idea. The aim of this article is to look critically at what habitus offers for research. Despite its prominence, I argue that its common application as a stand-alone concept risks reducing its value to little more than decoration. Conceived by Bourdieu as a mediating device between structure and agency, habitus is frequently criticised for being overly-deterministic and unable to account for individual change. I argue that if habitus accents continuity, it recognises potential for change too, and this is most likely realised through individual movement across social space, which Bourdieu describes as 'field'.

I am going to discuss these questions by drawing on the accounts of three middle-class students who left state-funded secondary schools to study for A levels at an English independent school. The doctoral study on which this article is based explores educational decision making as a classed practice beyond the dichotomies of a privileged middle class set against a disadvantaged working class. The research is situated in two academic institutions: an independent school and a sixth-form college [1], where I follow the journeys of 12 young people from starting A level courses [2] to making university decisions.

The three students discussed in this article are distinctive from the wider group, having joined the independent school from the state sector. Their transition to a new and very different educational environment is explored through the lens of habitus, capital and field. The article argues that anchoring habitus to cultural capital provides a means to understand how individuals are differently positioned in their new environment. Moreover, by fastening habitus to cultural capital the concept becomes easier to grasp hold of empirically. Without using cultural capital to steady it, habitus is elusive and beyond observation. Nevertheless, in developing the concept in this

way we are left with an imperfect and arguably restricted understanding of habitus. Claims of revealing habitus through research can be made only in terms of the effects and outward manifestations of something that is embedded below the individual consciousness.

Nevertheless, I conclude that in interpreting habitus as encompassing cultural capital, there is something worth grappling with. Above all it accentuates the weaknesses associated with concepts of 'identity' as free-floating on the one hand, or determined by structural location on the other. Furthermore, I conclude that it is through immersion into a new field that we see habitus most clearly. The collision of habitus and field brings together the mix of innocence and critical insight of the outsider questioning its otherwise taken-for-granted principles and practices.

### **Habitus – more than a metaphor?**

As much as Bourdieuan language is fashionable and his work widely referenced within the sociology of education, evidence of its practical use is scant (though see Hodkinson (1998) and Reay (1998). Habitus, which Bourdieu described as a 'thinking tool', is the most widely referenced, but offers no prescription for its use as a research method. As Reay (2004) observes, habitus 'is probably Bourdieu's most contested concept', and Roy Nash asks, 'is it all worth the candle?' (1999, p. 185). I suggest its strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Its lack of definition invites us to think about the myriad ways it might appear through data. Perhaps it will make itself known through individuals' reflections of their everyday experiences, or maybe in their ways of talking, dressing or moving. It is both tantalising and elusive, offering the promise of a more subtle analysis of how class is lived and experienced by individuals. However, the absence of definition has arguably led to its misuse and as a means to aggrandise research. Consequently, my own interpretation of habitus adopts a formulation which I could *work with*, rather than *refer to*.

In order to work with habitus it must be understood as a relational concept. The formulation of '(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice' helps us to see how habitus cannot be detached from the overall framework illustrated by this admittedly pseudo-mathematical formula. We glimpse the habitus as it comes into contact with field, and we see this through the narratives of school change as each student reflects on entering a new place within the educational field. Habitus is exposed through their attempts to understand the informal, unspoken rules of the new environment. Anchoring habitus to cultural capital, I interpret it through the students' confidence and knowledge of the academic environment, its hierarchies and their place relative to other students. I explore how the new students' accumulation of cultural capital is used, abandoned or adapted as they negotiate the field.

In working with habitus alongside cultural capital, we can see too how individuals' position in the field is understood dynamically through the matrices of time and space. Capital is valued in relation to field, with individuals' stocks providing currency that is always contingent. Like a cultural savings account, individuals are able to use or transfer capital accumulated over time. Furthermore, some forms of cultural capital accrue more 'interest' than others, and the value of capital is increased or decreased through its scarcity or abundance. For example, cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications will be worth more or less at different times and in different places.

In developing habitus to encompass cultural capital, layers of knowledge and experience provide the individual with the tools for change. Habitus is open to *possibilities* and *potentials* rather than fixed certainties. Although individuals' behaviours may be seen as patterned, to say that they follow a pre-programmed destiny overlooks that habitus includes the 'permanent capacity for invention' (Bourdieu 2004, p. 63). This possibility becomes clearer when looking at individuals encountering new fields:

the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history (unlike character) is endlessly transferred, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance, raises or lowers the levels of expectation and aspirations. (2004, p. 116)

Entry to a new field can be seen as providing the opportunity for habitus to change as individuals are confronted by the unfamiliar. That is not to say that habitus will *necessarily* change in response

to the field. I suggest that habitus is a never-ending process of construction, with individuals' biographies and stocks of capital in constant tension or alignment with the field. Whilst this captures the dynamic and relational nature of the concept, the individual practices are generated through differential holdings of capital. For Bourdieu, individuals are always positioned relative to others, but rather than those positions being fixed forever, they vary at different times and in different places.

If habitus is to be of most use, then, it is in reminding us of the subjective dimension of social class, as individuals' embodiment of structures beyond the labels affixed to them. It is here we see most clearly the distinction between what habitus offers and the more agency-focused concept of 'identity'. The contemporary interest in identity work in educational research (Coffey, 2001) emphasises how individuals are free to construct and shape the way they see themselves and are seen by others. In giving primacy to active identity construction we risk attributing too great a capacity to agency, as if individuals are free to try out different identities. Habitus fastens the subject more firmly to social structures, and habitus can be seen as generating classed practices linked to where groups of individuals are positioned through similar stocks of economic, cultural and social capital.

Having rehearsed some of the debates about the concept of habitus, I will now introduce my research, before considering what is revealed through the narrative data.

### **Methodology**

The students were interviewed at regular intervals during their two years of A-level study, and I adopted Wengraf's (2006) biographic narrative technique, with the use of a single question designed to induce a narrative response: 'How come you are at this sixth form, studying these particular A levels?' The second interview picked up on what had been said in response, and this was followed in subsequent interviews by a teasing out of the themes that had emerged. Using NVivo software to analyse the data for themes and categories, I explored the ideas in greater depth, following lines of enquiry as they were raised by the participants.

### **The Participants**

The two young women and one young man were interviewed during the autumn and summer terms of their first academic year, and then again during their second year. The narratives illustrate how the transition from state secondary school to independent sixth form can be read both as a straightforward change of schools, but also as journeys through social space. Working with the concept of habitus reveals individuals' subjective response to their new environment. In fixing habitus to cultural capital, the students' negotiation of their new environment is seen in relation to the school's class-coded capital. I look first at the students' reflections on their move to sixth form, their reasons for joining and their responses to the process of transition. I then discuss how these young people see themselves in relation to other students as they negotiate the field, navigate its spaces, and challenge its rules.

### **Leaving Me Behind?**

The narratives may be read, on one level, as offering explanations for joining the sixth form, and how students respond to the challenges in entering a new environment. Pam described what led her to move away from her previous school in terms of 'wanting to be organised again, and enjoy school .... my attitude had changed so much. I just partied all the time. I applied to this school because my best friend wanted to come here, but she actually didn't get in'. The decision to join the independent sixth form is attributed to very personal troubles and concerns about the way Pam saw her life was heading. Certainly not a planned process, the application was made almost by chance. Because of a friend's interest in the sixth form, Pam thought 'it would be worth a day off school to keep her company'. Pam reflected that the move was previously 'unthinkable', and not something she had discussed at home. The collection of narrative data retains the real-life twists

and turns of fate, which otherwise risk becoming smoothed over by the more traditional questions and answers, which create the illusion of decisions made strategically and straightforwardly.

Reading the narrative through the lens of Bourdieu, Pam's story reveals how class is culturally and symbolically constructed. Following feminists who have incorporated gender into Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998, 2004), we can see how gender and class combine to produce a fragile subjectivity. The move to the independent sector has encouraged Pam to question her behaviour and everything she had previously taken for granted. The narrative is imbued with a sense of having left something of the old self behind in order to become worthy of the privilege she associates with the new school:

When I came here it felt ... like ... something I could be proud of myself again. ... and I thought this is a new start, I can change. I still find it difficult to keep up with the work, but I feel I have definitely made progress.

Pam had constructed an identity of herself as an academically-failing student, and as someone who deserves better. By joining the sixth form, she imagines a chance to be with hardworking students, who she perceives as hardworking and intelligent.

In similar vein, Louise says:

I started going out more ... every night and most weekends ... this is ... um like an amazing school and you pretty much get your first choice of uni if you put the work in. I knew that I wouldn't get good A-level grades if I stayed with my old friends. They want a social life first, and work comes second. I want to be successful and hopefully I've turned a corner.

The new school is seen to offer an escape from a past life that is recounted with embarrassment. What is striking in both accounts is the narrators' evaluation of the move as somehow offering protection from temptations of the social life outside; the school represents a fresh start, and a haven. The young women articulate their educational future as predicated on leaving a part of themselves behind.

Whereas Skeggs and Reay work with Bourdieu to illustrate the way that gender and class combine to produce stigmatised working-class identities, Pam and Louise provide examples of the more finely-drawn boundaries and judgement-making that takes place within and between classes. The move to independent sixth form can be seen as disrupting the young women's ordinary and taken-for-granted behaviours and dispositions.

As I will explore below, the young women's later interviews reveal their attempts to become a part of their new environment. Their immersion in the field addresses questions as to the nature of habitus as, on the one hand, durable and resistant to transformation, or, on the other hand, as a concept that encompasses the potential for change and adaptation. The alignment between the young women's habitus and their new sixth form may be described in terms of their ability to develop a 'feel for the game', and the extent to which the transition represents continuity or disruption of the practices and routines of everyday life. This is not necessarily about stark binaries of working-class and middle-class differences, but, I would argue, more about the students' perceptions of themselves in relation to the school's representation of class-coded culture.

The transition to independent school is represented through both the informal and formal routines of a very different culture to the young women's previous experience. Pam found herself standing back from the weekly 'tutor time', which made her uncomfortable and unable to participate. Louise describes the rules as 'a bit pedantic', but this does not stop her desire to comply with them. Louise's narrative projects her mixture of awe, disbelief and excitement bound up in her early weeks of sixth-form life. Louise was eager to tell me about the daily assembly and twice-termly cathedral services, which she found both daunting and stirring. These rituals offer displays of the school's dominant symbolic capital. These are occasions that come to represent what is valued and what is expected of its students. For the young women, such occasions were opportunities which made clear the differences in their own prior experience, and the focus of their early concerns was not on academic demands, but instead what Louise describes as the 'tiny things', the rules and implicit codes of behaviour.

### **Becoming La-di-dah?**

Continuity or disruption of the young women's habitus can be seen through their narratives of friendships, and most importantly, how they were seen by former friends. Pam said she knew that her friends saw the school as 'very snobbish', and although she described maintaining friendships, when I first met her, she emphasised the extremely painful nature of the transition:

They say 'how's your private, genius school'. Have you got new stuck up bitches for friends?

At our first meetings in November and April, Pam told me she found it hard juggling two diverse groups of friends. She had struggled to fit in, and didn't have the same sense of ease with the new school as she had with friends 'from outside'. At our first meeting she described feeling more 'at ease' with her old friends, nevertheless trying very hard to break into new friendship groups. When we met nine months later, she still talked about being pulled in two directions and still 'feel[ing] more at ease with the old crowd'.

Pam's story raises interesting questions about the potential for change, and, particularly, the extent to which she retains elements of her former life outside of school. For Pam, a successful transition is understood in terms of the reconciliation of past and present friendship networks. The maintenance of friends and a social life outside of her school activities had been a focus of our discussions on each occasion we met during her first academic year. Pam described feeling out of place and not fitting in with her classmates. She constructed an identity of the 'newcomer' amongst students who had been at the school long-term. However, at the beginning of the second year, we talked about whether it was still possible to pick out these students from the minority who had joined the previous year.

No, not really, not any more. I think I was quite prejudiced before. I thought they were all right snobs. I think it's just that I've eased into the environment now and where I like ... see them everyday, they're now just a part of everyday life, so I don't feel any different to them.

Pam's response is illustrative of the way that people are *othered* through social distance. Initially, at least, Pam regarded her fellow students as 'snobs', with no differentiation or subtlety in her perception. After just over a year, she described having made good friendships, and not feeling any different from them. Pam's observation and reflection provide an interesting contrast with usual formulations of 'us and them' as embracing the power imbalance between privilege and disadvantage. Just two months into the school, Pam had regarded the majority of students as a homogeneous mass of elite 'others', with nothing to distinguish themselves than their perceived difference from what she had previously known and understood. With her narrative's emphasis on transition in terms of establishing friendships, we can see that Pam's thoughts and attitudes towards her fellow students have developed over time.

Similarly, for Louise, the school is initially seen as foreign territory, populated by strange and unknown others. She articulates a sense of standing on the edge, observing from afar. However, unlike Pam, for Louise, the transition is seen as 'no way back' to her former social life. She does not challenge her friends' labelling of the school as 'posh', and she says she understands why they tease her about 'becoming la-di-dah'. Louise says her friends are accurate in their description of the girls as 'naïve', and the boys as 'arrogant'. Although Louise described feeling embarrassed about her friends' attitudes towards her new school, she appeared to accept this as a price to pay for her 'opportunity'. Unlike Pam, she described being less interested in keeping previous friendships, and told me she had formed some close relationships when we met two months into the first year.

### **Being Myself**

If the young women's narratives placed emphasis on the emotional experience of joining their new sixth form, and as challenging their identity and friendships, then Stephen's narrative offers a contrasting perspective. His narrative is at first detached and rationalised:

I knew I would get a better education here. In fact, I think this is the best education of my life so far. I really enjoy being here and I have found my friends easier to relate to than my previous school. The teachers are so much better, and I know that this is a more professional school. I suppose I don't get on with everyone, [laughs] but then it would be a strange world if you did.

However, despite these mainly positive reflections, the first month was blighted by academic struggle and family conflict. Stephen felt unable to continue with his science A levels:

Anyway I was getting quite depressed about it all, and so after about a week, I saw the head tutor about changing the physics and chemistry for English and history. My parents weren't happy about me wanting to change. They were putting all sorts of pressure on me ... the pressure was huge. Luckily [tutor] ... gave them more of an insight into how it is here.

When I interviewed Stephen again towards the end of his first term, the change of school was seen as overwhelmingly positive, having enabled him to develop new confidence:

The friends I'm making now ... there's no one I'd say I don't get on with ... not like my old school where people would judge the way I talked or the things I said.

Far from positioning himself as an observer standing on the periphery, Stephen appears to hurl himself into school life. According to the headmaster, he had already established himself as a 'character'.

Again, this narrative raises questions about *habitus* as embracing change. In contrast to the young women, for Stephen, I suggest the transition emphasises continuity rather than change, with *habitus* and *field* coming together more harmoniously. The new environment is embraced, and Stephen describes throwing himself into the life of the school. He draws on the school's support when he encounters problems with his A-level subjects. Stephen's cultural capital is evident through his ability to negotiate with teachers and to engage in classroom banter. For Stephen, the school offers a new environment and an opportunity to be *himself*, in his mind, a real, authentic self. This is, he argues, an identity that was ultimately suppressed in his previous school environment, and he told me he is no longer teased about his accent or 'eccentricities':

I used to be picked on a bit, not bullied as such, but people would laugh at my accent and make fun ... um ... of the way I always asked teachers questions in class. They used to tease me about not being very sporty too. I got quite depressed about everything, and so I'm glad to be here.

The move to sixth form is presented as an opportunity for Stephen to act 'naturally' and without fear of bullying. The new environment is seen as offering a break from the past, but a reconciliation of *habitus* and *field*.

Stephen was determined to embrace what the school was seen to offer, both now, and what it would offer him in the future. For Stephen, the move to independent education was filled with opportunities and benefits that he was determined to grasp. The themes of 'privilege' and 'advantage' were frequently articulated, and after resolving the early problem with his A-level choices, he seemed to have no doubts about the transition to sixth form.

This section has explored the way that the three young people have described the transition to independent school. I have worked with narrative data in order to discuss their evaluation of the process of changing school, and their initial responses to it. For the young women, their stories emphasise the challenges associated with former friendships and behaviours. The move is seen as requiring a change of self, and a renegotiation of previous friendships. Both narratives may be read as necessitating the creation of a new educational subjectivity. In contrast, for Stephen, the transition is presented with greater emphasis on overcoming initial academic struggles, and an emphasis on the positive experience of his new educational environment.

### Perceptions of Self and Others

I will now look at how the new students perceive themselves in relation to others. Their individual narratives can be seen as responses to the school's dominant representations of cultural capital.

The school encourages particular forms of cultural capital, with competitive sport and music emphasised through its publicity material, strongly embedded within the school day, and celebrated at assemblies. Time and space are allocated to these activities, helping to reinforce their value. Sporty or musical students accrue cultural capital through participation in such activities, and their time spent outside of academic work can be seen as coded in relation to the dominant culture of the school. Significance is placed on activities which reinforce the school's cultural identity. Conversely, time spent in carrying out paid work is strongly discouraged, and permission

is required from the headmaster. Perceptions of 'fit' between habitus and field cohere around the students' ability or desire to acquire the 'right' kind of capital for this particular field.

Class is embedded and implicit in the assumptions made about students' ability to give time to musical and sporting pursuits. The financial cost associated with spending time on these activities, and *not* carrying out paid work is unacknowledged. The emphasis on students fulfilling non-paid activities can be seen as obscuring the material costs of such pastimes. Expensive musical tuition or the ability to travel to sporting fixtures is open to those who not only have no need to use free time for paid work, but whose families are able to invest time and money in these extras. The school's preoccupation with sport and musical achievements reflects an institutionally-understood hierarchy of leisure activities that is consistent with the upper middle class. The cultural capital of those at the centre of the field is generated *by*, and enhanced *through* the doxa of the field.

The narratives described the school as privileging certain forms of cultural capital over others, thus generating students' perceptions of their place relative to others. Their perceptions were articulated through how they moved in the school's physical space too. For Louise, there were distinctive groups of students, with those who spent their free time in the sixth-form centre, and those who were 'too self-conscious to go there'. Louise described the sixth-form centre as somewhere that 'cool, and sociable people go to'.

For Stephen, the school offered no boundaries and on one level his first interview could be read as a performance of supreme social confidence. He was keen to tell me about the new friendships formed, and the many clubs he had joined. However, whether the ability to form friendships and 'join in' was the same as 'fitting in' is something I will discuss below. My first interviews had prompted me to question the extent to which the new students would become assimilated into school life, and what their articulation of a 'typical student' would tell me about the cultural capital valued by the school.

Pam identified the cultural capital valued by the school:

Excelling at everything, sport, music, grades ... The headmaster goes on about all this stuff ... every assembly ... it's always Saturday match results, tours to this place and that, how we're top of this league ... and I end up thinking what about those who just want to go out with friends at the weekend?

Although Pam was aware of a dominant culture, there was an overwhelming sense of her continued resistance to it. Having refused to give up a weekend job, the cultural capital gained from that experience could not be converted to something of value in the school. Instead, her paid work was regarded negatively, and reinforced her position as rebelling outsider. Her friendships from senior school survived the transition. For Pam, habitus could be seen to collide with field, and for the school's dominant capital to be recognised without being accepted. However, it would be wrong to see Pam's habitus as impermeable and unyielding to the time spent in the school. Her exposure to this place, its students and its doxa add a further layer to her habitus, with the potential for its effects to emerge over time.

For Stephen, there was a clearly articulated understanding of the school's dominant culture. Despite the initial enthusiasm and sense of 'fitting in', there was a sense of frustration about his not quite fitting the school's ideal:

Look at me [laughs], you can see I'm the sporty type, not! I sometimes think that they want you to be like ... this amazing all rounder. It's true what they say about the school. They are arrogant here, and unless you're amazing at everything you're a *nobody*.

Stephen's perception of the institution's expectations sits uncomfortably with his own identity as neither sporty nor 'amazing at everything'. If he has embraced the school, he also positioned himself in relation to the 'all rounders' he sees as possessing the cultural capital the school espouses. Nevertheless, I suggest that Stephen has found a place within the field and his transition has been one in which his language, behaviour in the classroom, and interactions with teachers have found a harmony in this field.

Through their differential stocks of cultural capital the three middle-class young people were differently aligned to the field. Existing forms of capital were sometimes valuable and transferable to their new school, but sometimes worthless and illegitimate. The concept of habitus emphasised

the nuances so often missed through labels of social class. The degree of fit between habitus and field was imperfect, and the transition was characterised by resistance for Pam, negotiation and compliance for Louise, and for Stephen, affirmation.

### Conclusions

In working with Bourdieu's tools relationally, we can see how individual habitus responds in harmony or discord with the field. For Pam, Louise and Stephen, the transition provoked questions on the formerly taken-for-granted.

I conclude that habitus includes scope for change and improvisation, and this is seen through individuals' responses to a lack of fit between habitus and field. However, where habitus and field create an almost seamless fit, the possibilities and potentials for change are unlikely. Where individuals enter a new field or the field structure changes, individuals' responses, ideas and behaviours can be seen as adding layer upon layer to habitus. The collision of habitus and field results in the mix of innocence and critical insight of the outsider questioning otherwise taken-for-granted principles and practices. I propose that whilst habitus accents continuity, there is always possibility for transformation, and this potential is most likely to be realised through individuals' movement within fields.

The narratives have raised questions about the usefulness of habitus as a tool for empirical research. It is a slippery concept, and there is doubtless a risk of seeing habitus as everywhere and nowhere in the young people's narratives. Integrating habitus with cultural capital offered a means to work with a more tangible but arguably restricted conceptualisation. Its limitations are all too apparent when considering whether habitus is consistent with change. How might we know whether habitus has changed or whether behaviours and attitudes are transitory? If habitus operates below the surface, can we ever know what it was, is, or has become? I conclude, therefore, that if at a conceptual level habitus offers promise, then it is not fully realised in its practical application.

The challenge for researchers is to move beyond the intellectual and abstract level. Bourdieu's framework can be seen as addressing the problems and limitations of occupational class analysis, and the students' narratives offer further lines of enquiry. The middle/working class dichotomy offers an overly-simplistic account, capturing those at both ends of the spectrum, but clearly failing to understand the lives of those in between. Furthermore, I maintain that to make use of occupational class labels takes much for granted, and offers the illusion of commonality where in fact there is great diversity. A Bourdieuan framework renders a more fluid and multidimensional working of class identities.

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### Notes

- [1] The independent school is a fee-paying institution with its own sixth form. The sixth-form college is a nearby state sector institution where the majority of students are studying A levels.
- [2] A levels are the most common entry requirement for English universities.

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